

# The Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens japonicus* at Tal Chhapar, Churu District: A new species for the Thar Desert, Rajasthan



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The Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens* possibly forms a clade with *A. pratensis*, *A. roseatus*, *A. cervinus*, *A. spinoletta*, and *A. petrosus*, and was, until recently, treated as conspecific, with the last two. Four subspecies are recognised, of which *A. r. japonicus* winters in South Asia (Tyler 2004).

It 'breeds in north-eastern Russia: from Chukoskiy Peninsula, Kamchatka and the northern and western shores of the Sea of Okhotsk, west to south-eastern Taymyr and Krasnoyarskiye kray...south to Baikalskiy Khrebet, Khrebet Khamar Daban... and Stanovoy Khrebet, as well as on Komandorskiye...Islands, Sakhalin, and the Kurilskiy Islands...'. It 'winters in Asia, mainly in Japan...South Korea...and south-eastern China...common in eastern Chang Jiang valley (sic), becoming rarer towards the coast, with a handful of records in Hong Kong...less commonly or rarely also in Taiwan...north-westernmost Vietnam...northern Myanmar...central Nepal...north-western India...northern Pakistan...Uzbekistan...and southern Israel' (Alström & Mild 2003).

The Buff-bellied Pipit is an uncommon winter visitor to Pakistan (Kohat, Bannu, and the plains of the Indus south to

Karachi), Nepal, Darjeeling, and Manipur (Ali & Ripley 1998), and 'generally rare' but more frequent in north-central Pakistan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Roberts (1992) treated it as a subspecies of the Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*, and stated, 'some individuals have fleshy brown legs particularly the Japanese sub-species *A. spinoletta japonicus* which also occurs in Pakistan'. It is described as rare for India (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), vagrant for Bhutan, with two records (Spierenburg 2005), and 'probably a rare winter visitor and migrant in Nepal' (Grimmett *et al.* 2000). Very few sightings are shown on the map for the Indian Subcontinent (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

On migration, and in winter, it is found in a variety of open, often wet, habitats such as damp grasslands, stubble and ploughed fields, meadows, sea- and lake- shores, mudflats, river courses, etc. (Alström & Mild 2003). Therefore, the presence of Buff-bellied Pipit at Tal Chhapar, a dry grassland, was unexpected. The bird was first seen in December 2011 and regularly seen from 20 January to 22 February 2012 [201] at Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, Churu District, in Rajasthan. It was not seen, or





Photos: Sharad Sridhar



202. Buff-bellied Pipit, December 2012.

perhaps missed, for some days but again sighted on 06 March 2012.

Next winter about eight birds were sighted on 01 December 2012 [200, 202] at an area where some water seepage occurred, in the sanctuary. On 23 March 2013 two birds were recorded and thereafter there were no sightings. The species was sighted again on 20 November 2013 and c. 30–40 birds were present in different parts of the sanctuary. Later, by the end of December 2013 fewer birds were sighted and they seemed to have dispersed to other areas. By mid January 2014 c. 10–15 birds were sighted.

Pipits are dull and somewhat cryptically plumaged, being generally plain brown with dark streaks above and below. Many of the species look rather alike, differing in only small morphological details that make them difficult to separate in the field (Simms 1992). However, the identification of the species at Tal Chhapar was straightforward. The bird gave good views, was well observed, photographed, and later unambiguously identified through the detailed descriptions in Alström & Mild (1996), Beaman & Madge (1998), and French (2006).

### Field notes

Generally, the Buff-bellied Pipits looked a touch slimmer and smaller than Water Pipits *A. spinoletta* present in the area. Moreover, darker legs of latter also helped in separating the species. Its upper parts were brown with no streaking, but prominent buff lines were visible on its mantle, and it had a very faintly streaked crown. The wing-bars were clear-cut and prominently white. Being in winter plumage the bird was easy to identify, as it showed considerably large, and more clear-cut streaks on the breast and underparts. These streaks extended for the full length of the flanks, becoming fainter towards the undertail coverts. The underparts were whitish. The face of the pipit was very distinctive with a bold, and complete white, eye-ringing standing out, as did the pale lores, distinctly dark moustachial stripe and buffish supercilium merging with the eye-ring and broader behind the eye. The cheeks were grey-brown. Of the bare parts, its bill was pale with a dark tip, and its fineness was apparent. The legs were reddish-brown or flesh coloured [200, 202].

By late February the pipit looked quite different; the streaks became much fainter and orange buff appeared on the breast. The facial pattern became indistinct and the clear-cut wing-bars of the winter plumage were lost [201].

### Behaviour

At the time of arrival in early winter Buff-bellied Pipit were generally in mixed flocks with Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* which are commonly seen in the sanctuary. Later they kept to themselves and were mostly seen at well-watered grassy areas, with small puddles around leaking water supply pipes in the sanctuary.

A brief account of some aspects of the behaviour of a single Buff-bellied Pipit observed in January–March 2012 is as follows:

The bird was regularly observed foraging on the edges of the man-made water hole surrounded by grassland of the sanctuary. The water-hole being quite frequently used for drinking water and bathing by the diurnal raptors during the day, probably kept the pipit away. In the evening the pipit was observed energetically moving around the small man-made water hole wagging its tail regularly while picking aquatic prey from above and below the water's surface. The pipit usually picked insects from the surface of the water. At times it would wade in water to pick insects. It was regular to this foraging location.

### Conclusion

Apparently the species has occurred at Bharatpur in eastern Rajasthan. Both Kazmierczak (2000), and Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show isolated record(s) but the source/s of Bharatpur records cannot be traced. There is a recent confirmed record of the species from Ranthambhor where one bird was observed on 30 and 31 December 2013 (Sangha *in press*). However, there is no record of the species from the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. Thus the Tal Chhapar bird constitutes the first confirmed record from the Thar Desert supported by photographs.

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